

***How Not to Lose a Presidential Debate: Applying Narrative and Social Media to
Modern Debate Strategy***

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

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Abstract

Presidential debates have served as a crux of democratic engagement throughout American history. Although the style, technology, and discussion around presidential debates has evolved over decades, the strategies are consistent. The role of media and the ways in which candidates relate to audience members is key to success in presidential debates. The analysis of former presidential debates lends itself to the understanding that through narrative, candidates are able to avoid being perceived as a 'loser' when leaving a debate. I analyze the narrative paradigm as well as modern social media concepts of dual screening to evaluate what candidates and their campaign teams can do to succeed in presidential debates.

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I would also like to thank Dr. Berg, Dr. Frankland, and Dr. McCauliff for teaching me the skills needed to succeed on this project.

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Process Analysis

The process of researching for the thesis began months before the actual thesis was formulated. I initially had the idea for this thesis subject near the end of my Junior year, as I was working in political campaigns and taking higher level communications courses. Shortly after beginning the high-level communications classes such as Persuasion, Political Communications, and Argumentation, I found myself drawn to strategy concerning political debates. I knew quickly after taking these classes that my thesis would surround a political debate subject.

Professor Bauer and I met multiple times as I ran him through my ideas for the subject, and he gave me many sources to research. Over the summer, I spent time online looking through academic articles, campaign strategy literature, and interviews with campaign professionals. Through this research I found the two focuses my thesis covered, which are narrative and dual screening. The beginning of the semester included weeks of reading scholarly journals of political science and communication, as well as researching presidential debates. Initially, I found it difficult to narrow my focus, but Professor Bauer helped me realize that in an undergraduate thesis, it was not realistic to focus on all forms of debate, rather than just narrowing down to presidential debates.

After most research was done, I began writing. We decided to break the thesis down into sections, first giving the background and significance of presidential debates, and then looking into the narrative theory and the dual screening strategy. Essentially, narrative applies to the actual candidate's strategy, whereas the dual screening is more for the campaign team. These concepts are both explored highly, yet neither have ever been fully applied as campaign strategy. Throughout the analysis, I kept finding the content so interesting that I wanted to change the focus of the thesis. Professor Bauer did a fantastic job of guiding me as I trailed off topic at times. Together, we maintained a clear focus, and retained a good working schedule. We worked through deadlines, and save for a few rare moments, I was always able to meet these deadlines.

The most valuable lesson I learned, other than the content of my thesis which I believe will help me get a job, is the ability to narrow down work. Traditionally, I have struggled to pick a focus, liking to do many things at once. I have been involved in many clubs, worked multiple jobs, and taken 16-18 credit hours a semester since I was a freshman. When approaching the thesis, I tried to approach it like the rest of my life. This meant trying to do everything at once, rather than chunking out my work, and picking specific topics of most importance. The thesis process has taught me to narrow down my work, and not split my time between too many facets. I am grateful for these skills.

Introduction

Most Americans remember the moment when Michael Dukakis was asked, “Governor, if Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?”¹ This question destroyed Dukakis’s campaign when he replied with a very technical, unemotional answer. Memorable moments like these are prevalent throughout the history of presidential debates, and political advisors attempt to avoid having their candidate fall into these common traps. When approaching a debate, it is common for campaigns to think about memorizing a few one liners, find replies to frequently asked questions, and learn to deflect expected attacks. Candidates are taught the different strategies to come out as a winner in a debate. Throughout this thesis, I will outline exactly what the importance of presidential debates truly is, explore what candidates should aim to achieve with debates, and finally explain how candidates can accomplish these debate goals. Rather than strictly focusing on how to ‘win’ a debate, I argue it is substantially more important to avoid being perceived as the ‘loser’ in a presidential debate. With this knowledge, it is through a use of narrative and dual screening that candidates and campaign teams are able to avoid losing a presidential debate.

When approaching a presidential campaign, there are two main players, the candidate and the campaign team. The candidate must be prepared to tell the most compelling story while the camera is focused on them and must be relate to enough audience members that they are not forgotten or disliked. The campaign team on the other hand must utilize social media throughout the debate to give live spin and analysis. These two players work together to create a narrative that can stick with audience members. Through the combination of both candidates and campaign teams, viewers of presidential debates are given conflicting stories about each

¹ "Dukakis-Bush debate: Death Penalty," YouTube, June 4, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DF9gSyku-fc>.

candidate. It is the job of the campaign team and the candidates to work together to make sure their story is the most compelling. This is the key to not losing a presidential debate.

Background

Debate has been a fundamental aspect of democracy since its inception. From the Greek debates in the Agora, to the 1787 constitutional convention in Philadelphia, different forms of debate have played a key role in the development of policy and the selection of leaders. In the United States, debate is central to the way modern voters perceive candidates and make decisions in the electoral process. With the horse race narrative that surrounds elections, debates serve as the climactic peak of the election process. These debates have not always been quite as widespread and public as they are today, and the widespread viewing of political debates has grown exponentially since the 1960's.² A brief background of the role debates have played in presidential elections is important, because it serves as a framework to use as a base for any further analysis of presidential debates.

To begin an understanding of presidential debate in the United States one must look back before the televised debates of the 60's. The first important political debates in the United States were the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858. These debates were organized for the 1858 senate election but set the stage for future presidential debates to take place.³ The telegraph allowed for the debates to be reported on nationally, and each of the seven debates between Lincoln and Douglas had monumental impacts on the end results of each man's respective career.⁴ Douglas

² "Handout #4: History of the Presidential Debates," PBS: Public Broadcasting Service, accessed October 20, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/app/uploads/2015/12/HANDOUT-4-HISTORY-OF-DEBATES.pdf>.

³ Robert McColley, *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1998-) 103, no. 1 (2013): doi:10.5406/jillistathistsoc.106.1.0155.

⁴ Fergus M. Bordewich, "How Lincoln Bested Douglas in Their Famous Debates," *Smithsonian*, last modified September 2008, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-lincoln-bested-douglas-in-their-famous-debates-7558180/>.

ended up winning his election, yet Lincoln's performance in the debates catapulted him into national stardom that helped him become president and maintain popularity through tumultuous times.⁵ After the Lincoln-Douglas debates, there was a hiatus of large-scale political debates for a while, but the foundation for future debates had been built.

The next important debate is generally thought to be the Kennedy Nixon debate of 1960. This understates the importance however of the 1948 Republican primary debate which was broadcast via radio to over 40 million people, making it the first nationally aired debate.⁶ This debate, which took place between New York Governor Thomas Dewey and former Minnesota Governor and World War II Navy veteran Harold Stassen, was a fundamental step towards what voters now see in their political debates. While the format of this debate would be considered unusual by today's standards, with each man giving a twenty-minute speech and then giving an eight-minute rebuttal, at the time this was groundbreaking. Republicans across the country could hear directly from the two potential nominees, regardless of where they lived in the country.

It took another twelve years before another substantial debate took place in a presidential election. In the month and a half leading up to the 1960 general election, there were four televised and radio broadcast presidential debates. Nixon and Kennedy faced off for what amounted to around seventy-four million Americans per debate.⁷ This was an unprecedented level of viewership and was a monumental step towards more voters hearing directly from their prospective candidates. These debates were also more interesting to viewers than former debates, with a panel of four journalists asking questions to the candidates, rather than simply longform

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ron Elving, "Before Bright Lights And Rapid Fire, There Was 1948 And One Question," NPR.org, last modified November 10, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/11/10/455399441/before-bright-lights-and-rapid-fire-there-was-1948-and-one-question>.

⁷ Kayla Webley, "Breaking News, Analysis, Politics, Blogs, News Photos, Video, Tech Reviews," TIME.com, last modified September 23, 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2021078,00.html>.

speeches that were entirely prepared beforehand. These debates set a precedent that influenced all future debates, and the format of these four initial televised debates was created intentionally. Actually, there were many months of heated arguments between the Nixon and Kennedy team about who would ask questions, if notes would be allowed, and how long the debates would be.⁸ These fundamental decisions have impacted the way debates have functions for decades to come.

From 1960-1976, there were no more presidential debates. In 1964, when Johnson was taking office after the assassination of Kennedy, he was leading so far in the polls he decided to decline any requests for debates from Goldwater.⁹ From 1964-1976, the excuse commonly used to avoid debating was that the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) time provisions were too limiting. These provisions required that if a debate was hosted by a television network, they must include all candidates, even all of the fringe candidates. A workaround agreement had come about in 1960.¹⁰ The FCC provisions made for a great excuse for leading candidates to avoid a debate.

In 1976, Gerald Ford, not confident in his polling strength, decided to debate against Jimmy Carter.¹¹ A workaround for the equal time provisions was found, which was that if a non-television organization hosted the event, and the television network was simply filming it, the equal time provisions did not apply. This effectively turned the debates into news events or reporting on something that was happening. This meant that televised debates could continue to

⁸ John W. Self, "The First Debate over the Debates: How Kennedy and Nixon Negotiated the 1960 Presidential Debates," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2005): doi:10.1111/j.1741-5705.2005.00253.x.

⁹ "A Brief History of the Modern Presidential Debate," American Enterprise Institute - AEI, last modified September 29, 2008, <https://www.aei.org/articles/a-brief-history-of-the-modern-presidential-debate/>.

¹⁰ Christopher Klein, "7 Things You May Not Know About U.S. Presidential Debates," *History.com*, last modified August 31, 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/7-things-you-may-not-know-about-u-s-presidential-debates>.

¹¹ Rick Hampson, "When 'Ford Freed Poland': A Debate Cautionary Tale," *USA TODAY*, last modified September 13, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2016/09/13/debates-1976-ford-carter-trump-clinton/90303644/>.

take place similarly to how they did in 1960. After 1976, there have been debates for every U.S. presidential election.

This brief history of the evolution of presidential debates in the United States does not completely explain the tremendous growth of debates from 1976 until today. The viewership, horse race narrative, and direct impact on elections have become more prevalent as media gains more importance in each election. There are famous moments from presidential debates such as Reagan shouting “I am paying for this microphone Mr. Green!” in a 1980 primary debate, or Michael Dukakis showing no emotion at the hypothetical question about his wife being raped and murdered in the 1988 debate against George H. W. Bush.¹² As recently as 2016 there have been famous moments such as Donald Trump repeating the word “wrong” into the microphone as Hillary Clinton spoke. The debates have certainly gained traction in their popularity and mass appeal to voters and non-voters alike.¹³ This popularity is one of many reasons why it is ever so important to study the methodology in which candidates should approach presidential debates.

Role of Media

With all of this background understanding of presidential debates, there is a key player in all presidential debates. That key player is the media. In the Lincoln-Douglas debates, the reach of the debates was amplified by the popularity of the newspapers which carried the messages pushed in the debate to the public. In 1948, because of the rising popularity of the radio, millions of people listened to the Republican primary debate for the first time. Through the rise of media technology, the methodology of campaigning and debating has evolved. In 1960, one could argue that the series of Nixon vs. Kennedy debates were more of an entertainment spectacle than

¹² NHIOP, "Ronald Reagan: "I Am Paying for this Microphone" (1980)," YouTube, July 22, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rd_KaF3-Bcw.

¹³ Brian Stelter, "Debate Breaks Record As Most-watched in U.S. History," CNNMoney, last modified September 27, 2016, <https://money.cnn.com/2016/09/27/media/debate-ratings-record-viewership/>.

anything, since the media played a huge role in fabricating the rules and structure to boost viewership. Since 1960, the media has used debates as a tool to intensify the horse race narrative.

Today, there is a higher emphasis on non-traditional media such as social media. Throughout this paper the impacts of social media will be kept in mind and explored thoroughly. Media has always played a part of the structuring of debates, and the strategies for different types of media are certainly always changing. On television a candidate should think differently than they should for a radio debate. Is the same true for thinking about the role of social media? Campaign teams should certainly think about the ways in which modern media impact the results of a presidential debate.

Significance Today

Presidential debates have become an established part of the discussion surrounding the election of the president. In the United States, the debates are indisputably popular, especially during the time of the general election.¹⁴ Regardless of the impact the debates have on voter's decisions, it is fact that millions of Americans tune in for the debates every election cycle. In recent history, it seems the debates are growing in popularity with debates between Clinton and Trump reaching over eighty million traditional viewers, with millions more watching at bars, parties, or through streaming.¹⁵ This popularity raises the necessity to research the significance of presidential debates. Many scholars and political strategists have weighed in on the true impact of presidential debates on the results of the elections, popularity of candidates, and the ways debates impact voters.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Political debates exist as a way for people to learn more about candidates, reinforce support for a candidate, or solidify their disapproval of a candidate. Thomas Holbrook, a political scientist from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, argues that “The evidence overwhelmingly indicates that the most important debate, at least in terms of information acquisition, is the first debate ... The first debate is held at a time when voters have less information at their disposal and a larger share of voters are likely to be undecided.”¹⁶ If debates are truly about political learning, it makes sense that the first debate would be the most important. Candidates have an opportunity to square off next to each other in a way that is less scripted and has a potential for spontaneous moments. Interestingly, another scholar, University of Alabama political scientist William Benoit, says “But keep in mind that especially in the primary, voters might not watch the early debates. They might wait for the debate that’s going to happen in their state, for those voters, it sort of is...the first debate, even if it’s the third or fourth in the season.”¹⁷ The implication from this quote is that any debate could potentially function as a first debate in the primary. This means that candidates should have a particular interest in targeting their messages towards voters in the states of a primary debate, especially since for many audience members, a debate might be their first introduction to the candidate.

When looking at the importance of debates, it is imperative to look beyond simply the number of people who tune in. While it is relevant to note that large chunks of the American voters do watch the debates, it is more important to analyze the actual impact of the debates on voters. Some scholars attempt to mitigate the impact of debates, claiming they only move a small portion of the population who are truly undecided. Larry Bartels, Co-Director of the center for

¹⁶ Thomas M. Holbrook, "Political Learning from Presidential Debates," *Political Behavior* 21, no. 1 (1999): doi:10.1023/a:1023348513570.

¹⁷ Tim Murphy, "Debates Matter More Than You Thought," *Mother Jones*, last modified June 24, 2019, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2019/06/democratic-debates/>.

the study of democratic institutions, writes that attempts to change perspective and image of competing candidates only has close to a 2% impact on the final election results.¹⁸ He continues to argue that persuasion around issues and economic perceptions only impact half a percentage point of the final tally.¹⁹ While messaging might not have a giant impact on deciding a winner, they certainly sway a small batch of voters. Bartels lists many different examples of efforts to shape images of candidates and mentions debates as a key example. 2.5% is not insignificant. In the 2000, 2004, and 2016 elections, a swing of 2.5% would have changed the result of the election. In cases such as the 2000 election, if the debate were to swing the votes of only .5% of the vote, the election results could have ended differently.

This argument about the slight impact of debates is substantial not only is there political learning, and high viewership, but there is actual persuasion taking place. Important to note, while debates only seem to marginally help the perceived winners, the effects on the perceived loser of the debate can be drastic. According to William Benoit, “So it’s hard to say that one element, like a debate, is vital or can guarantee a win, because there are so many messages going around. Debates are useful for voters. They can help candidates. They can’t guarantee a win, but I think they can lose you the campaign if you mess up too badly.”²⁰ Important to note is that debates function more as campaign enders rather than campaign winners. It is more probable that a candidate will hurt their campaign than gain much traction through a debate. With this knowledge, candidates should strive to not lose a debate, rather than worrying about how to win one.

¹⁸ Larry M. Bartels, "Priming and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns," The University of Michigan Press, accessed October 26, 2019, <https://www.press.umich.edu/pdf/0472099213-ch4.pdf>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Murphy, “Debates Matter”.

There are plenty of examples of candidates firmly losing a debate. A candidate who is otherwise doing well could perform poorly in a presidential debate and effectively end their campaign. In the 1976 debate between incumbent Gerald Ford and challenger Jimmy Carter, Ford had a large gaffe where he claimed repeatedly that Eastern Europe was not dominated by the Soviets.²¹ This was in fact not true, and Carter capitalized on this falsehood which was commonly known to the public. In fact, Carter's communication director Gerald Rafshoon even said, "We won the election that night," shortly after the debate.²² Another famous instance that proves Benoit's point is that of Michael Dukakis's debate performance against Bush. His lackluster performance is credited with a decline in the polls of around 3.7% in the last three months of the campaign.²³

All of this evidence goes to prove one major point, the presidential debates are incredibly important. Both general and primary debates have long lasting impacts of the results of the elections. Even if some debates fly under the radar without any memorable moments, there exist enough examples and enough data to justify the research and strategy that must go into presidential debates. Throughout this paper, I will explain how candidates can utilize these debates to their advantage. I argue that it is less important to be perceived as a sole winner of a debate, than it is to be perceived as not a loser. Those who lose a presidential debate stand to be impacted far worse than those who win.

How Not to Lose?

With this background information, it is clear that when preparing for a debate, a candidate should focus on how not to lose. Debates might not serve to boost a candidate's poll

²¹ Lawford83, "Ford-Carter debate excerpt," YouTube, last modified June 4, 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=7&v=w8rg9c4pUrg.

²² Hampson, "Ford Freed Poland".

²³ Bartles, "Priming".

numbers much, but they can be a place for a candidate's campaign to falter. Throughout the history of presidential campaigns, losing a debate has been one of the worst things a campaign can do. In order to approach a debate, a campaign would be wise to study communication theory. Through the exploration of Fisher's narrative paradigm, the role of media, and an application of the past knowledge of presidential debates, one can best prepare themselves not to lose. This next section will look at how candidates can tell better narratives in debate, how media can be utilized to be perceived as a winner and look at examples of both of these concepts in action.

Presidential Candidates: Understanding Narrative

Political debate is about who can tell the best story. There exists extensive research to support the idea that much of persuasion happens through story telling. Walter Fisher, a scholar in the field of communication, explains the concept of the narrative paradigm, which posits that "Humans as rhetorical beings are as much valuing as they are reasoning animals."²⁴ This understanding of people suggests that individuals respond at least equally to values than they do to reason. Reason in this situation of a debate could be evidence, policy, or data. Values are likely to be linked to compelling stories, and emotional appeals. Communication scholar, Pamela Cooper, states that "all communication is narrative" and later that "story is imbued in all human communication endeavors, even those involving logic."²⁵ This explanation of communication is clearly applicable to debates. While many people listen to or watch debates under the premise of searching for logic, many of those find themselves focusing on stories. Narrative is the key to communication, as humans communicate primarily through stories.

²⁴ William F. Woods and Walter R. Fisher, "Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value and Action," *College Composition and Communication* 40, no. 2 (1989): doi:10.2307/358142.

²⁵ Pamela Cooper, "CSCA presidential reflection: Our stories... our legacy," *Communication Studies* 55, no. 2 (2004): doi:10.1080/10510970409388628.

The narrative paradigm, which I accept as an appropriate lens to use for analysis of political debate, was not originally intended to be used as a strategy for candidates. Interestingly, Fisher, being a rhetorical critic, developed the narrative paradigm and narrative theory solely as methods to analyze rhetorical texts. Although Fisher and other rhetorical critics used their methods for analysis, I believe that one can use rhetorical criticism methods to train candidates. Narrative criticism concepts can be flipped from tools to evaluate texts into useful models for debate strategy. Throughout this section of the thesis, I will utilize narrative theory and its underlying concepts to explore how candidates can avoid being perceived as the loser in a presidential debate.

My belief in using rhetorical criticism techniques to teach candidates is not exclusive, as many experts suggest using a similar strategy. While most campaign professionals do not cite Fisher or other academic scholars as their inspiration, they describe (maybe by accident) the theories created by communication scholars. An example is Mark McKinnon, who was chief strategy and media advisor to a George W. Bush, when he said “something I learned in presidential politics is that people don’t really vote on issues for president. It’s a vote on attributes, and the attributes that they focus on are strength, trust, character, shared values.”²⁶ Essentially, people do not care as much about issues, or Fisher’s ‘reason’ as they do about the attributes, being more ‘value’ based concepts. Narratives can be used to fulfill these values, and simultaneously not oppose the reason which people hold true to their own world views. With this knowledge, one should keep narrative in mind throughout their preparation and approach to a presidential debate. In order to fully make use of a theory, one should understand each of the major concepts which make up the theory. With the narrative, there are three major concepts that

²⁶ "Q&A: Mark McKinnon," The Mercury, last modified February 4, 2017, <https://utdmercury.com/qa-mark-mckinnon/>.

individuals must understand in order to enhance their performance in a debate. These concepts are those of public moral argument, narrative cohesion, and narrative fidelity.

The context of narrative that I will focus on is within a framework Fisher calls the “Public Moral Argument”.²⁷ Fisher generally focuses on narrative persuasion in the sense of argumentation aimed at the “public”. He discusses the idea of public moral arguments, and frames these as having to be both “made available for consumption and persuasion of the polity at large” and also as “aimed at ‘untrained thinkers’.”²⁸ What this means is that presidential debates are clearly within the realm of Fisher’s public moral argument. Presidential debates are available for anybody to watch, generally for free through their computer or television. Additionally, presidential debates fit Fisher’s ideal situation of aiming at ‘untrained thinkers’, because they are targeted directly to lay voters. Due to these circumstances surrounding presidential debates, it becomes ever clearer that narrative paradigm is an appropriate tool to use. An important connection between narrative theory and political science research is that of the research about the impact of the first debate. Research suggests that the impact of the first debate is the greatest, meaning that candidates should maximize their attempt at narrative during these first introductions to audience members.

Tying directly presidential debates, narrative theory focuses heavily on the idea of a common voter. On the idea of voters, political science scholar V.O Key Jr. states that voters are moved by “central and relevant questions of public policy, of governmental performance, and of executive personality.”²⁹ This quote clearly suggests that voters look at more rational facts such as policy or governmental performance. Fisher, however, suggests that “These perceptions and

²⁷ Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm”, 11

²⁸ Ibid. 12

²⁹ V. O. Key, “The Responsible Electorate,” 1966, doi:10.4159/harvard.9780674497764.

appraisals of political discourse and action become stories, narratives that must stand the tests of probability and fidelity.”³⁰ This analysis leads to the belief that information which would otherwise be considered strictly rational, is best conveyed through the approach of storytelling.

The next two pieces of the narrative paradigm puzzle are coherence and fidelity. These terms are used in the analysis of rhetorical texts such as speeches, books, or shows. In debate however, coherence and fidelity come in waves interwoven throughout short speeches and rebuttals. Before applying narrative theory to debate strategy, one must fully understand the methods of coherence and fidelity. These concepts tie together to create the persuasive stories candidates are intent on telling.

Narrative coherence explained as “does the story make sense”.³¹ Coherence is about if the audience is able to both follow a story and make sense of the key purposes of said story. For a story to be coherent, it simply needs to be followable or make sense to a voter on a logical level. Essentially, coherence is connecting point A to point B. Narratives can have coherence and still not persuade an audience, but with coherence, a story is at the very least understandable. There exist instances in which stories are told that do not fully grasp the concept of narrative coherence, “Narratives that are not coherent or logical are not persuasive in commanding or controlling the narrative.”³² If a story is presented, yet it does not make sense to the audience, any persuasive impact of the story is likely taken away. Essentially, when looking at coherence, one can think of it as a first requirement in order for narratives to possess any persuasive elements.

³⁰ Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm”, 10

³¹ Michael Eaves and Michael Savoie, “Big Brother: Merging Reality and Fiction: An Application of the Narrative Paradigm,” *Texas Speech and Communication Journal* 29, no. 2 (2005)

³² R. S. Zaharna, “Reassessing “whose story wins”: the trajectory of identity resilience in narrative contests,” *International Journal of Communication*, August 2016,

Narrative fidelity is slightly more complex than coherence and is infinitely more difficult to establish. Fidelity is defined as “the truth quality of the narrative- whether it represents accurate assertions about reality or rings true with what you know to be true.”³³ This definition of fidelity ties into the debates in the sense that the stories told must be relatable to target audience members. For example, for a story to connect with an audience member, it must ring true to an experience or understanding that the audience member already has. For narrative fidelity to exist, meaning a story rings true, first coherence must have been established. It is incredibly important to note that a story can have coherence yet fully lack fidelity. If an individual completely understands a story, and finds it to be make logical sense, the individual could then find that they simply do not believe the story. If an individual understands a story but does not find it rings true to them, this would mean that there is coherence, yet a lack of fidelity. This happens often times when individuals hear an argument and say something to the effect of ‘I understand where you are coming from, yet I disagree.’ This type of thought happens when people find coherence but not fidelity in a narrative.

Through this understanding of Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm, we can look at how coherence and fidelity can be established in order to succeed in a presidential debate. I believe that those involved with campaign preparation should research and understand the narrative paradigm. Through a full understanding of coherence and fidelity, one would find that telling a story is the ideal method to persuade individuals in a debate. Throughout campaigns, conflicting narratives play key roles in the decisions made by voters. A debate is the crux of where these competing messages come into conflict with each other.

³³ Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, Fifth Edition (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2017) 337

Narrative Applied

The field of applying rhetorical criticism methods to actual situations is fairly underdeveloped. What I will do is take coherence, fidelity, and other general concepts of narrative and apply them directly to presidential debate preparation. Throughout recent campaign history, the winning presidential candidates were those who told the best story. In the 1992, Bill Clinton was running against President George Bush who was up for re-election. There were three debates, each hosting three candidates, due to Ross Perot's rising third party attempt. The three candidates focused in, and told differing stories throughout the campaign, and in the debates each of these stories were put to the test. A great example to see fidelity and coherence, or a lack of either, is a question that was asked of all three candidates in the second 1992 presidential debate, which took place as a townhall with audience questions.³⁴

A woman from the audience asked each of the candidates how the national debt had affected each of them personally. Ross Perot was the first to answer, stating that the debt had made him leave his business and that debt is like a "ball and chain around you".³⁵ Perot is telling a story that makes sense by explaining how similarly to non-billionaire people in America, he has been impacted negatively by the debt. The coherence is fulfilled fairly easily, since Perot's story does make logical sense. The next step, fidelity, comes into play when Perot talks about the American dream, and how he feels he has been incredibly lucky to become as wealthy as he is. The American Dream is a regularly accepted value in the United States, and Perot is using it to intentionally create a sense of fidelity. Perot continues to say, "I have lived the American Dream, I came from a very modest background, nobody's been luckier than I've been."³⁶ After

³⁴ "1992 Presidential Debate with George HW Bush, Bill Clinton & Ross Perot," YouTube, last modified December 22, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jg9qB_BljWY&feature=youtu.be&t=26m00s.

³⁵ Ibid. 50:17

³⁶ Ibid. 49:48

discussing how the American Dream was fulfilled for himself, Perot says he wants to extend the American Dream to young people who currently cannot succeed. Lastly, Perot ends by explaining that he feels a responsibility, as somebody who has been incredibly lucky, to help spread the opportunity to succeed in America.

When Perot talks about his obligation to help others, and about the American Dream, he is fostering fidelity. While he does tell a narrative that is coherent and has some fidelity, many individuals might not relate because the story he tells does not ring true with them. At the time Perot was running, the economy was not doing well, and even the woman who asked the question mentioned that she personally knew many people who lost jobs or could not pay bills. This lack of relatability due to Perot's wealth impacted his ability to create fidelity, even if he was entirely truthful and coherent.

After Perot's answer, which could be classified as one with clear coherence, but shaky fidelity, Bush stood up to answer. He initially made a huge mistake, by checking his watch as the woman from the audience asked the initial question. This disregard immediately shook his fidelity, "It was the telltale sign of a man made uneasy—or, at least, bored—by an audience member's question about how a deep recession had personally affected him. The then president's display of impatience seemed to speak volumes more than his awkward response."³⁷ Bush's initial start to this response already chipped away at the potential he had to build coherence and fidelity. When telling a story, all factors matter, including the setting, appearance, and the tone of a candidate. At the end of Perot's answer, Bush began his answer with the statement, "Well, I think the national debt affects everybody."³⁸ He then begins to explain how the debt has to do

³⁷ Alex Markels, "George H.W. Bush Checks His Watch During Debate With Bill Clinton and Ross Perot," U.S. News & World Report, last modified January 17, 2008, <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2008/01/17/a-damaging-impatience>.

³⁸ "1992 presidential debate".

with interest rates, before he is interrupted by the moderator and the woman from the audience, both asking him to explain exactly how it has impacted him personally. Bush then begins his response by saying he's "sure it has" affected him because he has grandchildren, at which point the woman from the audience asks "how?"³⁹ What was happening here is that Bush's coherence was inconsistent because he was not able to tell a story that made sense. He claimed that national debt affects everybody, yet he was not yet able to give an exact example of it impacting him. He then deflects, asking her to explain the question, and asserting that simply because he has "means" he is not inherently disqualified from having been impacted by the national debt.⁴⁰ Again, what is happening here is a clear disconnect in his story. Perot, a billionaire, just explained step by step how the national debt and failing economy had impacted him personally, yet Bush was not able to specifically point out where these issues have directly impacted himself.

While Bush's coherence is shaky, since his story does not necessarily make much sense, it is his fidelity that was lacking. Fidelity is about telling a story that rings true to the audience, and the woman asking Bush the question clearly was not finding truth in his story. She says, "I know people who have been laid off from jobs, I know people who cannot afford to pay mortgages on their homes, their car payments. I have personal problems with the national debt, but how has it affected you? If you have no experience with it, how can you help us?"⁴¹ Her question serves as an attack on Bush's fidelity, as it questions his very ability to relate to the audience at all. Bush then, with a raised voice, answers "Well listen, you oughta be in the White House for a day, and hear what I hear, and see what I see, and read the mail I read, and touch the people I touch from time to time," before he diverts into a story about how he visited a black

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. 51:18

church and empathized with the communities plagued with teenage pregnancy and difficulty to make ends meet.⁴² This start to his long response immediately jeopardized his ability to develop coherence or fidelity with the audience. His narrative began by essentially accusing the woman of not understanding his personal story. This strategy is not effective for a few reasons. First off, by saying the woman simply does not understand what it is like to be president, Bush looks defensive and unrelatable. Of course, audience members do not understand what it is like to be president, they have not been president. In a debate, it is the job of the candidate to explain concepts to audience members, rather than to challenge audience member's experiences and to connect to the audience throughout their rhetorical story. Second, by challenging the audience member through the repeated statements of things she does not understand, Bush does the exact opposite of what fidelity is meant to do. Fidelity is about telling a story that rings true or relates with audience members, and Bush intentionally drove a wedge between himself and the woman asking the questions. In any town hall debate setting, an individual audience member generally represents hundreds of thousands, if not millions of viewers who are tuned in to watch. Through not establishing fidelity with the audience member, Bush hurt his narrative fidelity with many television viewers as well.

After Bush wrapped up his answer, it was Clinton's turn. Clinton walked forward and asked, "Tell me how it's affected you again?" to begin his response.⁴³ When she stumbles slightly, he says, "you know people who have lost their jobs and lost their homes?"⁴⁴ She replies, "well yeah..." and he then continues to explain how he has been a governor of a small state, and that the current policies from congress and the president impact him directly. He explains how

⁴² Ibid. 51:55

⁴³ Ibid. 52:35

⁴⁴ Ibid. 52:41

these laws restrict his funding, yet require that he implement more programs, and that he sees taxes go up and services go down for middle class people while the wealthy get tax cuts.⁴⁵

Through this explanation, he is telling a coherent story that many Americans at the time related to. The story makes sense, that as a governor of a small state he would see these impacts on many people. Clinton then continues, in an attempt to establish fidelity by saying, “In my state, when people lose their jobs there’s a good chance, I’ll know them by their names. When a factory closes, I know the people who ran it. When the businesses go bankrupt, I know them.”⁴⁶

This is a fidelity building statement. Clinton is intentionally working to make himself more relatable to the audience members. Whereas Bush claimed the audience simply could not understand what he does as president, Clinton instead focused on bringing himself down to the level of the common voter. Clinton continues finally to explain that for 13 months he has talked to people just like the audience member asking the question. This answer does a good job of establishing fidelity. Fidelity is about telling a story which will ring true to an audience. When Clinton says he has spoken to thousands of Americans, and that he personally feels the problems that they feel, it causes voters to relate more with Clinton’s story than with Perot’s or Bush’s. Through this, Clinton finds himself with a more complete narrative, which is reflected in the later polling and eventual election.

It is important to note that examples like this are not rare, and that similar situations have arisen in which one candidate is defensive and another is able to capitalize on a deep personal connection with voters. Another modern example of this is the Obama-Romney debate on October 16, 2012, in which Obama and Romney both tried to sympathize and understand the

⁴⁵ Ibid. 53:00

⁴⁶ Ibid. 53:15

pain of Americans as the economy was not in great shape.⁴⁷ Throughout this debate, both candidates attempted to do what Clinton had done 20 years prior by connecting with audience members who asked questions dear to their personal struggles.⁴⁸ These situations arise regularly, therefore candidates must be prepared to handle them.

Analysis of Narrative

From this example, many specific strategies can be outlined for future candidates. Candidates must learn how to do what Clinton and Perot did, while avoiding Bush's mistakes. The first part of this comes from the ability to create coherence. Any story must make sense, and for coherence to function fully, one must be able to draw a link between the beginning and end of every story told. When Bush talked about not understanding the question, and then asserts that the woman should spend a day in his life, he creates distance between himself and the audience. If the audience understood the question, Bush's lack of understanding clearly does not resonate with the average voter. Most audience members would see themselves more as the woman asking the question than as Bush, since they have not experienced what he experienced throughout his presidency. Candidates should watch this example and learn that they must establish a coherent story, and act as if they understand questions asked. If a candidate, like Bush, feels as if a question would not apply directly to their experiences, the candidate should not act defensively, but rather tell a compelling story like Clinton did. Clinton, when asked this question, faced similar troubles to Bush. They both have wealth, and they both were not personally financially harmed significantly by the recession. What Clinton did, however, was to

⁴⁷ Sabrina Siddiqui, "Bill Clinton Won 1992 Town Hall Debate By Engaging With One Voter," Huff Post, last modified October 16, 2012, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bill-clinton-debate_n_1971685.

⁴⁸ Peter Baker, "In Second Debate, Obama Strikes Back," The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia, last modified October 17, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/17/us/politics/in-second-debate-obama-strikes-back.html>.

talk about the damage done to his state and claim that he personally knows people in Arkansas who were impacted by economic policy from Bush's administration. Clinton simultaneously did was tell a coherent story, with Bush as a bad guy who harmed the economy, and established fidelity, since Clinton is able to relate to and listen to voters across America. Clinton's response to this question is the key example of what candidates should do in situations in which their narrative stands to be harmed.

Furthermore, candidates should learn lessons from Perot's narrative he shared in response to the complicated question. Where Bush and Clinton had their own narratives to share, Perot needed to focus on fidelity mostly. As a billionaire, it could be argued that Perot would have a harder time relating with an average voter. His attempt at fidelity is fairly successful though, because he is able to tell a story about how he feels a responsibility to share the opportunity to acquire the American Dream. This story makes sense to voters who want the American Dream, so the coherence is clear. If a candidate finds themselves estranged from voters due to wealth, incumbency status, or other factors, they should always try to find a way to alleviate those fears from voter's minds. If the American people worry about wealth of a candidate, an intelligent story to tell would be that because of one's wealth, there exists an obligation to run and help share the successes that are possible to attain in America. Throughout presidential debates America has seen countless attempts for social or economic elites to relate with the 'everyday people'. Story telling is the way to convey this connection, because through stories, people find relatability.

A final note on narrative theory in presidential debate. While some candidates will be naturally be better story tellers than others and select individuals might be more confident on their feet, there are ways to overcome this communication skill deficiency. As debate scholar and

campaign advisor Brett O'Donnell says, "We should pay attention to who starts strong. The first 30 minutes of the first debate are the most important. That will set in motion the narrative, and help determine whom voters perceive to be winning the debates. It's hard to recover from a bad first outing."⁴⁹ What this means, is that candidates who want to tell a certain story must start doing so at the very beginning of the debate. Like Thomas Holbrook said earlier, the first debate is the most important. Tying this political science theory with the narrative paradigm leads one to see that candidates should develop a story they want to tell before the first debate happens. Once that debate begins, a candidate can begin to create coherence and fidelity with voters as they are at their most persuadable. The first debate, and more specifically, the first thirty minutes of the first debate, are unmatched in importance when candidates are attempting not to be perceived as the loser. It would be strongly advisable for candidates to figure out ways they can tell coherent stories with the intent to foster fidelity immediately as a debate begins.

Campaign Teams: Utilizing Media

Throughout this analysis, narrative has been the key focus. For the candidate themselves, telling the best story possible is the goal. For the rest of the campaign team however, it is important to manipulate media to the advantage of the campaign. Historically, presidential debates were popularized because media such as radio and television made debates accessible to more people. Today, debates have become a staple of politics, and the media influence over debate is everchanging. This section will explore how media can be used in order to help candidates be perceived as not having lost a debate. The concept of dual screening, and its role in

⁴⁹ Brett O'Donnell, "Brett O'Donnell: What to Watch For in the First Presidential Debate," The Daily Beast, last modified July 14, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/brett-odonnell-what-to-watch-for-in-the-first-presidential-debate>.

impacting how viewers perceive a debate is key to understanding media's modern role in debates.

Dual screening is a concept explored in political science and sociology, as a process in which individuals watch a debate and are simultaneously on their computer, phone, or tablet communicating about the debate as it happens live.⁵⁰ Throughout the 2012 debates, we saw the first major instances of dual screening. People tuned in to watch Romney debate Obama and simultaneously posted updates on their Twitter and Facebook feeds. As people watch a live debate, often times they then express their opinions or reactions via Twitter or Facebook as the debate is happening. The main research on dual screening has a focus on Twitter, since it is the platform with the easiest access to open dialogue through its hashtag and “@” functions in which users can communicate freely and directly without knowing each other.⁵¹ Through this interaction, there is a lot of room for the debate to be framed by different groups of people in different ways. If dual screening is truly popular, it would be a disservice to campaigns not to see how they can utilize social media during debates.

To dive deeper into what dual screening truly is, one must look back no further than the 2016 election. In the 2016 election, “The Oct. 9 showdown between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump broke a record set by the first presidential debate, which spawned 17.1 million Twitter interactions when it took place Sept. 26.”⁵² During one debate in 2016, there were 18 million debate-related tweets, meaning that discourse was happening rapidly, and constantly throughout

⁵⁰ Dhavan V. Shah et al., "Dual Screening During Presidential Debates," *American Behavioral Scientist* 60, no. 14 (December 2016): doi:10.1177/0002764216676245.

⁵¹ Mark Tremayne and Milad Minooie, "Using Social Media to Analyze Candidate Performance During Televised Political Debates," *Electronic News* 9, no. 3 (2015): doi:10.1177/1931243115593321.

⁵² Natalie Jarvey, "Second Donald Trump-Hillary Clinton Showdown Unseats First As Most Tweeted Debate Ever," *The Hollywood Reporter*, last modified October 9, 2016, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/second-donald-trump-hillary-clinton-debate-most-tweeted-936761>.

the duration of the debate.⁵³ Individuals watched the debate while simultaneously communicating with others about what they were hearing. This dual screening exposes these individuals to three different but equally important groups of people. The first, is the opinions and reactions of their peers, friends, or inner circle. This includes live responses from other users who are dual screening. The second major group that individuals are exposed to is journalists, who actually make up the plurality of all debate related tweets during the debates.⁵⁴ These journalists work like messengers who pass along the narratives being shared by the candidates in the debates, but the journalists also act as framers, who put spin on stories in unique ways that can influence people. The third group, and the area where campaigns might have the most control, is partisan media or entertainment, who put personal spin on the debate live as it is unfolding.⁵⁵ The partisan figures are remarkably important to the perception of debates. These three groups each have substantial influence over the framing and narrative surrounding debates.

Throughout the analysis of the impact that dual screening has on debates and debate strategy, I will apply the role of narrative and look to explore the ways in which campaigns can understand and adapt to the rise of dual screening. As dual screening has been explored, there are theories that the role of the social media interaction is quite impactful on the perception of who won or lost the debate. Additionally, research shows that dual screening actually impacts voting, meaning that the impact of the digital conversation surrounding debates could potentially mirror the impact of the debate itself.⁵⁶ Throughout the research of dual screening a few key ideas have

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Cristian Vaccari, Andrew Chadwick, and Ben O'Loughlin, "Dual Screening the Political: Media Events, Social Media, and Citizen Engagement," *Journal of Communication* 65, no. 6 (2015): doi:10.1111/jcom.12187.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Andrew Chadwick, Ben O'Loughlin, and Cristian Vaccari, "Why People Dual Screen Political Debates and Why It Matters for Democratic Engagement," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 61, no. 2 (2017): doi:10.1080/08838151.2017.1309415.

been proven true. First, it is clear that the amount of people who dual screen is high enough that campaigns should care. As millions of tweets are posted during the debates, there is no question that dual screening is significant. Furthermore, the process of dual screening has real impacts on voter's decisions in the voting booth. Since there are many people who dual screen, and it has a real impact on the results of the election, it is key to understand how to manipulate the social media sphere.

Candidates have limited control over what happens on social media outside of their own campaign accounts. The candidates do have limited control though and can use their accounts to play a role in the dual screening process. An example, and one which relates back to narrative theory, is the first 2016 general election debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. During this debate, Clinton accused Trump of claiming that China had created climate change as a hoax, to which Trump said, "I never said that."⁵⁷ After this altercation, Clinton's twitter account tweeted saying "'I never said that.' —Donald Trump, who said that," alongside Trump's initial tweet in which he said, "The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive."⁵⁸ This tweet by Clinton's account amassed 87 thousand retweets and 146 thousand likes. Trump's narrative was that he had not said the things he was being accused of having said. Clinton's narrative was that Trump is lying, and that his prior actions should be brought up and analyzed. These conflicting narratives came to a climax through the campaign's tweet. This type of rapid-fire response done

⁵⁷ Alison Daye, "Shimmying and Sniffing: Social Reaction to the Presidential Debate," CNN, last modified September 27, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/27/politics/presidential-debates-social-media-reaction/index.html>.

⁵⁸ Hillary Clinton, Twitter, last modified September 26, 2016, https://twitter.com/HillaryClinton/status/780577643456565248?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E780577643456565248&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2016%2F09%2F27%2Fpolitics%2Fpresidential-debates-social-media-reaction%2Findex.html.

by a campaign team during a debate is a wise method to utilize the concept of dual screening. The Clinton team knew, even though dual screening was a relatively new concept, that people would be on Twitter during the debate. Due to this knowledge, the team posted many tweets during the debate to attack Trump or build up what Clinton was talking about. Through a systematic series of posts, candidates can attempt to reach their followers simultaneously throughout a debate and on social media.

This example is one which shows the direct link between narrative and dual screening. Through a live response on social media, the Clinton team directly attacked Trump's coherence. He was telling a story in his response, claiming very simply that he had not said the Chinese made up climate change as a hoax. Clinton, rather than engaging directly on the debate stage with Trump's denial, had a social media team who used her account to attack Trump's coherence, by proving he was lying. Obviously, there is room for discussion about the effectiveness of her avoidance of confronting Trump, yet the impact of her Twitter usage is undeniable.

A second, less explored method to use dual screening, would be for a campaign team to use their own social media accounts in attempts to boost their candidate's story. Rather than tweeting directly from a candidate's campaign account, campaign staff, volunteers, and others can tweet, seeming like regular supporters and post in favor of their candidate. This type of social media work can be deceptive, as most viewers do not know the names of the staff members for the presidential campaigns. When a seemingly random person tweets during a debate about how an argument made by a candidate really stuck with them, it could help to convince a random viewer to agree with the argument. This means that coherence and fidelity could be established more easily through the usage of social media from non-campaign accounts.

There does not currently exist any further research on this subject, however, the impact of social media is proven to be true.

Conclusions

After a base understanding of narrative theory, historical narrative examples from prior debates, and the role of dual screening is established, a candidate is ready to put these concepts together to find how not to lose. As explained throughout the beginning of this thesis, debates do not generally boost or amplify candidate's poll numbers, but they are known to kill a campaign. When preparing to go into a debate, candidates must master the concepts outlined throughout this thesis. The candidate's team should understand exactly how dual screening can be used to push forward a specific narrative.

Blending narrative with social media is not always an easy task. Obviously, the candidate must do their part in the actual debate. Campaign teams will spend countless hours preparing a story based in research and an understanding of the American people's wants and needs. These narratives must contain coherent, easily understandable concepts that move from point A to point B without logical or emotional flaw. Once a coherent story is established, campaigns should figure out who the target audience is, and figure out what aspects of the story can be highlighted to develop a sense of fidelity with those audience members.

Once these narratives are being told on the debate stage, it is the job of the campaign team to simultaneously boost these narratives through supporting tweets and posts, and also tear down the narratives of their opponents. It is essential that campaigns be timely and relevant throughout the duration of the debate, and that they find a way to be noticed during the onslaught of tweets during a debate. It not hard to imagine the impact social media would have had on the Bush, Perot, Clinton debate. Clinton's team could have posted tweets during Bush's response

calling him out for looking at his watch, or for not understanding the question. Through a combination of narrative and the use of media structures such as social media, candidates are able to establish coherence and fidelity while simultaneously attacking the coherence and fidelity of other candidates.

Once a candidate achieves these two concepts, coherence and fidelity, they will not be perceived as a loser in a debate. Candidates are perceived as having lost a debate because their story either did not make sense to voters or because their story did not ring true with voters. When stories both make sense and ring true, a candidate is maximizing their persuasive abilities. It is my hope that through this research and analysis, candidates in the future can tell better stories. The American people surely deserve coherent narratives that will ring true to their everyday experiences. It is only through story telling that we can improve our presidential debates.

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